

Frontier Traders and Pioneer Cattlemen: An Hawaiian Perspective

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Hawaii conjures up visions of pineapples, palm trees, beaches, and surf rather than cactus, cowboys, grasses, round-ups, and the things associated with the cattlemen's frontier. Nevertheless, islanders were actively engaged in a thriving cattle business at the time Texas was fighting for independence from Mexico. John Palmer Parker, a New England sailor who came to Hawaii in 1808, was the most important pioneer in this early trade. For fifty years he was involved with the thousands of cattle that ranged Hawaii.¹ As time passed he shifted from hunting wild cows with a gun to raising blooded cattle in fenced paddocks. When Parker died in 1868 he left to his heirs the bigger part of a ranch that today consists of more than 300,000 acres of incomparable grazing land and a herd of fifty thousand of the finest Hereford cattle.²

It is interesting to note in tracing Parker's rise from financial obscurity that the factors enabling him to become a cattle king were identical to those that surrounded the emergence of the many cattle kings in the Trans-Mississippi West. These men were able to accumulate vast land holdings and great herds of cattle without using inherited money or extensive grants from the government as a special edge.³

There is a common misconception held by island people that the native king gave Parker a huge grant of land and from this he developed his vast ranch. Nothing could be further from the truth. Parker never received any notable privileges or favors from the ruling hierarchy of the island. During the first decade after his arrival he married a Hawaiian girl and developed a small farm along the northeast coast of the island near the present town of Kohala.⁴ From here he often made trips inland to hunt wild cattle. Then after spending his early years hunting, fishing, and farming at a subsistence level, he established himself as an inland trader and through frugality and hard work was able to accumulate the capital and experience which made it possible to put together his ranch.

Like Charles Goodnight, John W. Iliff, Conrad Kohrs, George W. Littlefield, Nelson Story, Shanghai Pierce, Dudley H. Synder, and other famous

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western cattlemen, Parker began as a trader of merchandise for raw material. Like these men he had a capacity to trade at a profit and he possessed the foresight that kept him in the vanguard of economic changes. More than anything else this was the key to his success as it was theirs, and to a large degree Parker and these capitalists were true to life models of rugged individualism and the cult of the self-made man that became part of the American Tradition.⁵

The cattle that became the essence of Parker's wealth were introduced to Hawaii in 1792 when an English naval officer, George Vancouver, presented a bull and five cows to Kamehameha I, the native king, as a gesture of good will.⁶ Over the years these animals multiplied and were added to by other importations.

When the whaling industry became important to the Hawaiian economy in the 1820's a demand for hides and tallow arose complementing the new trade. As a result investors became interested in the potential profits of the numerous herds of cattle on the main island which until then had been exploited only by a few solitary hunters.⁷ Although he was the best known hunter of Hawaii, Parker lacked the money to provide leadership to the cattle business during its early phases. The first capitalist of any reputation to devote his energies to the sale of hides and tallow was William French, a Honolulu merchant. A short energetic American, French first came to Hawaii in 1819 as a representative of William Sturgis, a wealthy Boston merchant, who sent him across the Pacific with a shipload of merchandise to trade for sandalwood.⁸ Successful in this initial enterprise, French continued with this cargo to China, where he and another protégé of Sturgis, Timothy G. Pitman, formed a business. Intending to establish a branch of this merchandising operation, French returned to Hawaii in 1826. He settled in Honolulu and established himself as a leading trader. Financial success during the next decade made French known as "the merchant prince."⁹ In 1835 he had prospered sufficiently to take a wife and to expand his business activities.¹⁰ Earlier, French had become familiar with the Kawaihae coast and the Waimea plain of Hawaii during his activities in the sandalwood trade there. As a result when cattle began to become valuable he moved to exploit the large, unclaimed herds that roamed this region.

After securing government permission, French planned to erect permanent ranching and trading facilities on the big island. With painstaking care he enlisted the cooperation and labor of a number of men to exploit the cattle herds ranging the rich grasses of the Waimea plain—a high, verdant plateau that stretches across the northern part of Hawaii. He logically sought out individuals with prior experience as cattle hunters. John Parker was the first pioneer of importance employed by French.

In 1835, at French's suggestion, Parker left his farm at Kohala, a village on the plain a day's journey to the southeast. He served French as bookkeeper, cattle hunter, and in other capacities.¹¹ Another foreigner in Parker's mold, W. W. "Harry" Purdy, sometimes known as "Jack", also worked for French at this time. This hard-drinking, intrepid Irishman had found his way to

Waimea after being shipwrecked on the coast of Hawaii. An excellent horseman and possessed with little desire or aptitude for indoor work, Purdy tended French's herds and hunted cattle in the mountains.¹²

French acquired two properties in the village that served as headquarters for his operation. One of these holdings consisted of the former land and buildings of an old cattle hunter named William Hughes.¹³ The other was a stone-fenced enclosure adjacent to the pasture of the Hawaiian Governor, Kuakini, where French erected several houses. The latter property, bounded by Waikalua Stream and called Puuloa, became Parker's home.¹⁴

In 1835, during the first year of operation, French and Company sold 587 "Dry Bullocks Hides" and nineteen casks of tallow.¹⁵ In the next five years the demand for hides and tallow increased rapidly and cattle hunting alarmingly reduced the number of wild animals. French was one of the first private businessmen on the island to realize the necessity of establishing up-to-date agricultural and ranching methods in order to prevent the animals from vanishing completely. In this period French established a herd in the vicinity of the Waimea village and Parker developed a smaller herd of his own that ranged the country farther up Mauna Kea, the huge mountain that flanked Waimea to the south-east.¹⁶

By 1840, French had two stores in operation on northern Hawaii. The most important was located in the small coastal village of Kawaihae and this became the focal point of regional business activities. A visitor during this period emphasized the pioneer nature of French's establishment when he pointed out that "the only building here of any importance is the stone store belonging to Mr. French."¹⁷ At Puuloa in Waimea, John Parker ran the other store, which was nothing more than a thatched hut. Although this store was less ostentatious than the one at Kawaihae, the agency at Puuloa, like its counterpart, became the center of the cattle business on the Waimea plain. Here French employed a saddle-maker and operated a tannery. Native labor was employed and Parker kept busy supervising this operation and collecting beef, tallow, and leather to supply the needs of French's growing business.

Wood products were also important to French's growing operation on Hawaii, and he was selling lumber as early as 1837. Great stands of koa wood on the slopes of Mauna Kea provided extremely fine material for building. As commerce with the other islands increased, construction material was needed in Honolulu and the increasing number of ships that took cattle from the island also carried lumber.¹⁸

Parker had been trained in mathematics during his youth in Massachusetts and had the necessary skills to maintain the books of this complicated business. There was no surplus of currency in Waimea at this time, and most of the business at the Puuloa store consisted of bartering for goods and services. Long-term credit and buying on time was the rule rather than the exception in these transactions. Meticulous records had to be kept, and the arrangements of previous months and even years had to be carried over and recalculated. French supplied Parker with different goods in exchange for his services and produce. Parker used these goods himself or exchanged them with those who

worked for French and those who paid the store in money or goods. The latter made it necessary for Parker to keep a list of even the smallest transactions.¹⁹

Despite their importance to the new business, life at Puuloa consisted of much more than bookkeeping and storetending. By 1840 French made numerous shipments of live cattle to Honolulu. Periodically it was necessary to gather and select cattle for market. These cattle were fattened in the pasture close to Waimea then driven to Kawaihae and transported 200 miles across the sea to Honolulu to supply the numerous whaling ships that visited the port each fall. French often left his other business activities in Honolulu and came to Waimea to supervise these tedious activities. One of the early shipments occurred during the first week of July 1840, when French selected forty bullocks in Waimea and had these animals driven to Kawaihae where they were loaded on the deck of the brig *Clementine* for the trip to Honolulu.²⁰

Francis Olmsted, a guest of French who accompanied this shipment of beef, described the suffering of these animals on the arduous, two hundred-mile trip across the extremely rough waters separating Kawaihae from Honolulu. The bullocks were crowded close together and lashed securely by their horns to a strong framework of spars on the center of the deck, so that it was impossible for them to move. Trussed up in this manner they were left exposed on the deck of the ship in the intense heat of the summer sun off Kawaihae, until a breeze from the land at 8:00 o'clock in the evening made it possible for the ship to get under way. As the brig carried the sun-beaten animals out into rough waters, their miseries increased. Although the journey was a terrible ordeal for the livestock, French's guest recalled the voyage was something less than a pleasure trip for the crew and human passengers. "All night long, we thumped about, to the suffering of the poor animals on deck that are thrown down every few minutes and were trodden upon by others . . . with the violent motion of the vessel, the creaking of the timbers and the noise made by the stamping of cattle upon the deck, sleep was out of the question."²¹

The growing ship traffic from the island and the business created by the whaling industry kept the employees at Puuloa busy. On November 9, 1844, Parker invoiced a large shipment of assorted goods sent to Honolulu aboard the schooner *Chinchilla*. Included were three large casks of beef weighing over 5,000 pounds. Parker also sent a large amount of tallow, suet, thousands of feet of ohia and koa lumber, thirteen sheep, and 402 pounds of wool from the store.²² Parker was in charge of salting beef and preparing products for shipment in Waimea. Harry Purdy, the cowboy for the establishment, supervised the transportation of these goods down the rocky road to Kawaihae in ox carts, and frequently drove live cattle, destined for Honolulu, to the beach.²³ William Bacle a long-time resident of the island who went to work for French in 1839, carried on shipping operations at the Kawaihae store and wharf.²⁴

Parker, Bacle, and Purdy cooperated with one another in carrying out their lonely and sometimes frustrating work. Bacle often relayed orders to Honolulu for saltpeter, sealing wax, and iron hoops to provision the Waimea beef packing operation, and both Parker and Purdy attempted to keep Bacle well supplied

with produce for passing ships. Parker's work was sometimes most grueling. He carried on the meat packing operation and the difficult job of salting the beef. Parker demonstrated the requirements of this task in a methodical letter that underscored the meticulous way he handled things at Puuloa: "Every piece of meet (sic) has to be rubbed over with salt so as the outside of the grain of the meet is broke . . . salt will enter a small distance . . . the packer must take great care and drink nothing stronger than brandy . . . in order that the meet may be pretty well cured."²⁵

During this period Parker and French became the first private ranchers in the region. By 1840 Parker had almost complete control over the operation of the store. He was paid in cash for produce that he provided for use at the establishment. French also paid him in merchandise such as calico, combs, soap, files, knives, needles, beads, cotton, screws, calf-skin shoes, salt beef, and taro. As he accumulated a surplus of goods, Parker sometimes traded for himself and became more of a partner than an employee.²⁶ French and Parker also cooperated in their cattle-raising enterprises. In 1843 they entered into an agreement and received a two-year lease to run their cattle on government land along the northern base of Mauna Kea.²⁷

The growing shipment of beef to Honolulu and the demands for the hides and tallow drastically reduced the numerous herds of wild cattle of northern Hawaii. By 1849 the decrease became so evident that the government invoked a tabu prohibiting the killing of any of the king's animals for four years.²⁸ This was an unmistakable indication that the old days were passing. Far-sighted men at this time established their own herds and began to pressure the government to provide them with well defined properties on which to range these animals.

In 1844 Governor Kuakini died. His successor did not take an interest in the cattle industry, and as a result activities in Waimea village began to decline. Although Kuakini's tabu against hunting cattle ended not long after his death, the carefree era of the old cattle hunter did not return. To make a living in the cattle business it became necessary to secure defined pasture lands and to brand and to keep close supervision over private herds. Within the next few years this economic reality brought great changes to the island. Men could no longer make a living collecting unbranded hides. The former cattle hunters became men without occupations. As a result many drifted into obscurity, adopting slovenly habits, and becoming addicted to excessive bouts with alcohol.²⁹

On Hawaii, as elsewhere, transition occurred rapidly during the early years of frontier development. Pioneers reaping rewards from these economic changes were in most cases individuals who had correctly anticipated new trends. Parker began in Hawaii as a landless castaway, became a cattle hunter, then a merchant, and finally the island's foremost rancher. Like cattle kings in the Trans-Mississippi West Parker amassed the capital to buy land and cattle on a large scale as a trader and merchant. He accurately determined the needs of the natives and settlers for manufactured goods from the civilized world and realized a profit bartering these items for material goods which the

frontier had in abundance. In retrospect Parker and others of his type were a kind of economic vanguard, the catalysts, who initiated the exploitation of heretofore untapped wealth and provided the link between civilization and the frontier that was so essential to the growth of modern capitalism.

NOTES

¹ For details concerning Parker's early years on Hawaii see a letter from John Parker to William Kenrick of Newton, Massachusetts, dated September 12, 1864. For information concerning Parker's activities at this time see also the original copy of Parker's discharge papers from the *Lelia Bird* (Parker Family Museum, Mana, Hawaii).

² This property is presently owned by Richard Smart, the great-great-grandson of John Palmer Parker. The ranch is owned outright and is not incorporated as most of the large ranches in the United States now are.

³ For an analysis of the careers of early western cattlemen see Lewis Atherton, *The Cattle Kings* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), pp. 218-240.

⁴ Recollections of Honii, Kipikane's sister, compiled by Mary Low, a long-time member of the early Parker household, stated that the young couple were married in the Hawaiian fashion. Later they were married by a Christian missionary and upon baptism Parker's wife received the name Rachel (Parker Ranch files, Waimea, Hawaii). For a record of Parker's farm in Kohala see claim made by Parker to the Land Commission in 1847 for this twenty-one acre tract in the Land Commission records (AH).

⁵ Atherton, *The Cattle Kings*, pp. 218-240.

⁶ Captain George Vancouver, *A Voyage of Discovery to the North Pacific Ocean*, Vol. II (London: G. G. and J. Robinson, Paternoster Row and J. Edwards, Pall Mall, 1798), pp. 99, 127.

⁷ W. F. Wilson, compiler, *With Lord Byron at the Sandwich Islands in 1825. . . . Being the Extracts from the MS Diary of James Macrae, Scottish Botanist* (Honolulu, 1922), p. 7. For another description of these cattle hunters see, *Diary of Andrew Bloxam Naturalist of the "Blonde" on Her Trip from England to Hawaii 1824-25* (Honolulu: Bernice P. Bishop Museum, Special Publication 10, 1925), p. 52. Bloxam says these men were employed by the government to hunt cattle.

⁸ Confusion exists as to the exact birthplace of French. The "Obituary of William French" that appeared in P, Dec. 6, 1851, states that he was a native of Vermont. The "Obituary of Mrs. French," which appeared in PCA, Mar. 6, 1880, states he was a native of Maine.

⁹ For details of French's early career as a merchant see letter addressed to "Gentlemen" dated Honolulu, October 9, 1844, in French correspondence (AH). See also, W. D. Alexander, "Early Trading in Hawaii," *Paper of the Hawaiian Historical Society*, No. 1 (Honolulu: The Bulletin Publishing Company, Limited, 1904), pp. 22-24. French left Boston on the brig *Neo* in September of 1818 on his way to China with a cargo of merchandise. French arrived at the Hawaiian Islands in March of 1819 and remained there trading for sandalwood until fall when he continued on to China.

¹⁰ "Obituary of Mrs. French," PCA, Mar. 6, 1880. See also copies of deeds for her property in Waimea (Parker Ranch files, Waimea, Hawaii).

¹¹ Private Commercial Ledger of William French and Company, January 11, 1836, to July 7 (AH). Earliest entry for J. P. Parker on this ledger was January 5, 1836.

- ¹² W. W. "Harry" Purdy was born in Ireland, December 2, 1800, and died on the Waimea plains June 22, 1886, at the age of 86 years and six months, an old-time resident. Jim Stevens, an acquaintance of Purdy and longtime employee of the Parker Ranch, said in his memoirs that French was either a manager or owner of Puuloa Ranch when John Parker and Harry Purdy came to work in Waimea, one as a bookkeeper, the other as a cowboy (Parker Ranch files, Waimea, Hawaii).
For a description on Purdy's exploits see, Charles Victor Varigny, *Quatorze Ans Aux Iles Sandwich* (Paris: Librairie Hachett Cie, 1874); and Alfons L. Korn, "Tall Tale of Jack Purdy and the Wild Bull," *The Hawaiian Journal of History*, Vol. 1 (1969), 43-52.
- ¹³ Recollection of Kaaikai, an old Hawaiian who went to live in Waimea in 1827. These recollections were written in 1906 by A. W. Carter (Parker Ranch files, Waimea, Hawaii).
- ¹⁴ Letter of William French to the Honorable British Commission for the Government of the Sandwich Islands, in the records of the British Commission for 1843 (AH).
- ¹⁵ Accounts of French and Greenway (AH).
- ¹⁶ In an unidentified account in the Parker Ranch files, Parker had a "tame flock" on the land "between Aaamuku of Hammuula," facing Waimea, "French had a large flock not so near the mountain." It would seem that Parker's herd ranged the area presently encompassed by Waikii Paddock, where no permanent water sources existed.
- ¹⁷ Francis Allyn Olmsted, *Incidents of a Whaling Voyage* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1841), p. 228.
- ¹⁸ Accounts of French and Greenway (AH).
- ¹⁹ Records of French and Company (AH).
- ²⁰ Olmsted, *Incidents of a Whaling Voyage*, pp. 235-236.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 236.
- ²² Copy of Invoice in French's papers from Parker (AH).
- ²³ "Harry" was the same Purdy who went to work for French in 1835.
- ²⁴ See letter of William Bacle to Receivers from Kawaihae, January 14, 1845, French's papers (AH). See also, "Obituary," F, Dec. 1, 1866, for William Bacle.
- ²⁵ Letter from J. P. Parker to Receivers Waimea, March 5, 1845, French papers (AH).
- ²⁶ From a Balance Sheet of money due Parker in French's records dated September 4, 1844, French file (AH).
- ²⁷ Interior Department Files, Book 1, p. 112, July 16, 1845 (AH).
- ²⁸ Emma Lyons Doyle, *Makua Laiana, The Story of Lorenzo Lyons* (Honolulu: The Advertiser Publishing Company Ltd., 1953), pp. 47-48. This tabu was not absolute. It only included all the wild unbranded cattle which is confirmed in P, Sept. 4, 1841, p. 51.
- ²⁹ See, Doyle, *Makua Laiana*, for numerous references by Lorenzo Lyons to the economic decline of the village during this period.